

SFGate.com

ADVERTISEMENT

Hurry!  
OFFER ENDS  
SOON

CAST™ Phone  
Get a Free 8300  
When You Buy  
One for

Only \$49.99

AFTER \$50 ONLINE  
INSTANT REBATE WITH  
NEW 2-YEAR AGREEMENT  
PER PHONE



SFGATE HOME • BUSINESS • SPORTS • ENTERTAINMENT • TRAVEL

Search



SFGate



Web by Google™

San Francisco Chronicle

## A SHARED GOAL

### Divided by class, soccer rivals united by love of the game

David White, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, February 21, 2007

[Email This Article](#)

Richmond High's boys soccer team spends winters playing behind the poorly lit corner of 23rd and Maricopa streets, where the corner-store windows are protected by bars, the pavement is cracked and potholed, and the temporary street sign touting a revitalization project is obscured by graffiti.

**Monte Vista** High's soccer team plays in Danville, off to the side of Stone Valley Road, where the rolling hills are green with damp grass and oak trees, the mansions are double-decked and garage doors come in threes at the end of winding driveways.

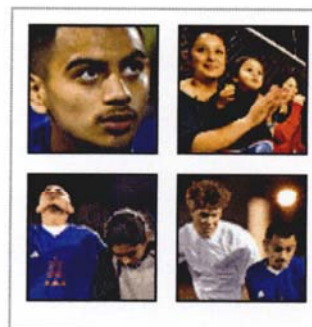
"Whole 'nother world," says Richmond senior Irving Paez, who skipped the soccer season last year so he could make \$7 an hour working at Big Lots to support his live-in girlfriend and newborn son. "They got it all."

On Saturday, he found himself standing next to **Monte Vista** senior Chris Beville, who lives in a gated community. Beville spent last summer starring for an elite club team and accepting a scholarship to play soccer at UC Davis.

"Oh, yeah, there's a little bit of difference," Beville says.

It's not really reflected in the playoff bracket, which forces the unlikely rivals to share 100 yards of artificial turf for 80 minutes of soccer. Saturday marked the fourth time in five years Richmond's poor had played Danville's privileged in a North Coast Section playoffs match.

**Monte Vista** has won every time, always by one goal. This year, the Mustangs are the defending section champions, undefeated in the regular season and seeded first in the



postseason. They want to keep winning because, frankly, they didn't put all this time and money into a being a losing operation.

Richmond, last year's section runner-up, was 17-4-1 in the regular season and seeded eighth in the postseason. They want to keep winning because it's an effective distraction from the fear of hallway violence at school, impoverished conditions at home and the threat of deportation at the next traffic stop.

The cultural and socioeconomic differences couldn't be more stark, but then, the scoreboard is no respecter of palatial estates or overcrowded rentals. Soccer is one of the few sports favored by poor immigrants and prosperous suburbanites alike.

That's why you get Richmond vs. **Monte Vista** time and again. The former ends its pregame team prayer with the Roman Catholic sign of the cross, followed by the singing of Spanish chants in a bouncing team circle. The latter team warms up to the crackling blare of "Sweet Home Alabama" and substitutes outward emotion with calm words of instruction.

An international game, and they live but 30 miles apart.

---

Paez -- you can call him Kiki, like everyone else does -- is the face and frame of Richmond soccer. He is a senior starter on a team with only four seniors. He's 5-foot-8 on a team with no 6-footers. He's 130 pounds on a team dominated by players with sucked-up chest cavities.

Right now, Paez's short-term concern is a nasty bruise on his left thigh. He developed a serious limp after a violent midfield crash 10 minutes into the game, sending Richmond's fastest runner and surest scorer to the sideline for treatment.

In the top row of the visitors' stands, Evelyn Silva shifts nervously on the aluminum bleachers, thinking her boyfriend's season has just ended. Jeremiah Irving Paez is sitting on her lap, with no clue what just happened to his dad. The 15-month-old with a mop of black hair and a runny nose is too preoccupied with a fistful of Doritos.

"He usually doesn't come to my games because it's too cold," Paez says.

Babies getting the sniffles are what Paez has to think about as a teenage father.

A newborn son during soccer tryouts last season meant no soccer for Paez. He got a job helping customers find items on sale at a local chain store. During off hours, he changed diapers, warmed up bottles late at night and drove Jeremiah to doctor appointments in his late-model Lincoln.

"He became the main thing in my life," Paez says. "I couldn't play because I had to be with him. I just had to work things out, get my focus. I didn't want to go crazy and stuff. I had a baby to take care of."

Paez is one of two fathers starting for the Oilers. He gets home from school after 3 p.m., returns for soccer practice at 5:30 p.m. and gets home again around 9. Silva, who met Paez at a high school soccer game three years ago, is a stay-at-home mom.

Last year, she wanted Paez to get a job and help with the baby. This year, with financial help from parents, he was able to rejoin the soccer team.

"Soccer means so much to him," Silva says. "Really, out of all the time he spends with soccer, he always finds time to spend with us, too. He's so good with Jeremiah. He already plays soccer with him. Jeremiah is always saying, 'Ball, ball.' "

Paez wants to graduate in June and go to college so he can make enough money to move his family into their own home. First, he wants to show Jeremiah how to beat **Monte Vista** in the playoffs.

"The stuff I went through, it just makes me play harder," he says. "I just take it out on the field."

---

After 21 minutes, the match is scoreless when Paez unleashes a shot from 30 yards out. **Monte Vista** goalkeeper Zack Lynch leaps toward the ball.

Lynch showed up to practice Friday wearing two diamond earrings and a confident shrug. "Pressure? I don't know, just going to school, not getting into bad things. Classes and schoolwork ... science, math."

Lynch lives at Blackhawk Country Club, where the houses' prices start in the formidable seven figures. Outside his house, you can walk a short path to Hole 1 of the members-only golf course.

He has been recruited by Sonoma State and San Diego but hasn't received a scholarship offer. What he does in the playoffs could win him a spot on a college roster. He doesn't sound worried about it one way or the other.

"If you're a goalie, you've got to be a little bit psycho," **Monte Vista** coach Matt Zahner says. "And you've got to be confident. If they're not confident, you're in trouble. We're not undefeated because we have an unconfident goalie. No, he's good."

Aren't they all at **Monte Vista**? Varsity players will tell you that the players who were cut from their team would start anywhere else. They talk about how much bigger and stronger they are than teams like Richmond.

Such blunt talk doesn't make **Monte Vista** the most popular team and lends credence to the Mustangs' silver-spoon reputation. Six years ago, the median household income in Danville was more than \$114,000, a number that has since soared. In the same U.S. Census, Richmond ranked at around \$44,000 per house.

Zahner is convinced everyone wants his team to lose.

"These guys, they expect to do well when they get on the field," Zahner says. "That's the pressure on them. We win, big deal, nobody cares. If we don't win, it's big news.

"With Richmond, it's like the Coach Carter syndrome. It's all feel-good stuff."

Lynch can't stop Paez's shot on goal. The top of the goal post can, though, and the ball bounces away from the net to leave the game scoreless at halftime.

---

Midway through the second half, Richmond has been muscled around for 60 minutes. Two players were knocked out of the game temporarily, and three others are laid out long enough to stop play.

Oilers junior Francisco Maciel is sent into the game to provide an energy boost, and he's waited two years for this. He quit the varsity team as a freshman, then spent eight months in juvenile hall last year after pleading guilty to attempted murder and assault with a deadly weapon.

"When I was inside, I promised God I would only do good things, good choices," Maciel says. "It was not easy for me being in there by myself, nobody around me. I just wanted at least one friend that could be supporting me and I could tell him how bad I feel."

After his release, Maciel was allowed back at Richmond High in the fall. He took extra credits to become academically eligible and meets weekly with his parole officer. The soccer coaches hardly recognized him when he returned.

"When I first met him, he was one of those players, you tell him to do something, he wouldn't do it," says assistant coach Jorge Flores, who played for Richmond's lone section championship team in 1994. "He'd rather quit than try harder. Now, he's not quitting, which is the exact opposite of his freshman year. He went through this experience that changed his whole life."

Richmond's reputation is criminal enough, letting a parolee play could add to the thuggish perception. Maciel hopes not. He wants to be seen as an example of a reformed person, even as he declares his innocence while declining to give further details of his conviction.

"God knows I'm doing good out here," Maciel says. "I'm not, like, smoking, drinking, doing drugs, making bad choices. I'm just proud of being back here."

---

Fourteen minutes remain in the scoreless game. **Monte Vista** has a corner kick, so star Chris Beville and a band of 6-footers bunch up near the goal.

Beville is the main attraction on this team. He's chiseled and handsome, polite enough to call 30-year-olds "sir" and talented enough to earn a college scholarship.

Of course Danville kids have it better than most; he gets that. But better living conditions beget heightened expectations at a school where all parents want their kids to be the best.

"People say we've got it so easy," Beville says. "We do have a lot of things around here, but we also have a lot of competition. A lot of superstars around here. There's expectations that you have to perform and excel. I've seen it get to other people pretty bad."

Beville sees a caste system at school that puts athletes at the top, rendering others "pretty much nothing out here." He feels pressure to get better grades than other students and says the course work at **Monte Vista** is more difficult than at other schools. He was cut by a top club soccer team three straight years before his 16th birthday, and there's no easy way to swallow that one.

If that's not enough of a hardship, how about this: After giving a verbal commitment to UC Davis, Beville tore ligaments in his knee in an early-season soccer game. For some colleges, that would be reason enough to withdraw the scholarship offer before a binding national letter of intent could be signed.

Beville missed two-thirds of the season, and still doesn't feel "right," but UC Davis stuck with its offer, and Beville signed with the school earlier this month.

He isn't saying his life is more difficult than for soccer players from Richmond. But although the pressure is different at a school like his, it's still pressure.

"I was happy once I signed," Beville says. "I always knew I'd be fine, my knee and stuff, but once I signed, it was like, 'Yes.' Now, I've got to get straight Bs and Cs and graduate."

Beville doesn't get to the corner kick, but teammate Jack Griffin does. The senior puts a header into the right corner for a 1-0 lead with 13 minutes, 46 seconds left in the game.

---

Richmond sophomore Jose Vasquez is a sweaty mess, causing his curly locks to fall over his right eye as he chases the ball down the sideline.

He doesn't play soccer year-round. He doesn't even play summer ball. This is his last chance to play an organized game until next winter. Or worse, if his visa application doesn't go through, any day could be his last in this country.

"We've struggled a lot," Vasquez says, "but things are better now."

He worked last summer for a construction company, a 16-year-old putting up A-frames with men twice his age. He earned \$15 an hour -- \$600 a week -- money that was saved to help his single mother cover the rent during the school year.

Vasquez shares a bedroom with three sisters and until recently slept on the floor. His mom has her own room so she can get sleep between jobs cleaning houses in the morning and babysitting at night.

"It was like a grown man's work," Vasquez says of his summer job. "Sometimes, people have to go through that just to get by. Here, people worry about their bills at home, 'Oh, my God, how am I going to pay the rent?' That was a way I can help my mom. If she needs help again, yeah, I'll work again or stay home and take care of my sisters."

His family moved from Guanajuato, Mexico, when he was 6 and settled in Richmond two years later. There, he's learned how to navigate the campus without getting into a fight and how to get around town without being noticed by anyone resembling an immigration official.

Richmond coach Rene Siles doesn't say how many of his players are undocumented immigrants but acknowledges Vasquez isn't alone.

"In the background, you have the issue of immigration and the raids of the INS," Siles says. "This year that's put a lot of stress on some of the kids and some of the families, the parents. That's why soccer is so important. Soccer is one thing that's part of who they are, something that's a joy, puts all the problems away for a little bit."

---

Vasquez leads a last-minute charge to the **Monte Vista** net only to see the ball to bounce out of bounds to end the scoring attempt.

The referee's whistle blows twice. The game ends, taking Richmond's season with it. **Monte Vista** players race to the sideline in celebration. Richmond players collapse facedown to the ground, some sobbing, others swearing.

Over the next half-hour, Paez kisses his son's forehead and says he's sure Jeremiah will beat the Mustangs one day. Vasquez can't stop sobbing, so Maciel walks over and puts an arm around his waist to support his weight.

Before the Oilers take a yellow bus back to the complexities of their lives, and before the **Monte Vista** players and parents return to their suburban comfort, the Richmond team walks toward the home team's sideline.

For a team that hadn't scored all night, the players hoped to make one lasting point.

"This town Richmond might not be the best place, but not only bad things come out Richmond," Vasquez says. "It can also be good things, like soccer. We're doing it for our community, just to change it a little. Maybe not a lot, but it's something to us."

With tears in their eyes, they face the **Monte Vista** High crowd.

Then, they applaud.

*E-mail David White at [dwhite@sfnchronicle.com](mailto:dwhite@sfnchronicle.com).*

*This article appeared on page A - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle*